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ABSTRACT

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Macro and Micro Features of Informal Meetings: A Theoretical Framework

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Running Head: Informal Meetings

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Abstract

In this paper, I present a comprehensive picture of informal problem solving meetings where gatherings of workers meet around computer screens, at their desks, in doorways, and in halls to accomplish multiple work-related tasks. I attempt to uncover interactional details of informal meetings by providing a micro-analytic model of informal problem solving and describing the temporality of these meetings. This micro-analytic approach identifies the phases of talk in IPS meetings as: (1) the opening; (2) recurring retrospective/prospective (R/P) cycles; and (3) the closing. Given the extensiveness and relevance of informal meetings, I argue that formulating a theoretical framework for understanding these kinds of interactions in the workplace is particularly important for communication theorist.

Macro and Micro Features of Informal Meetings: A Theoretical Framework

Often we interact in communicative activities that we hardly are conscious of our participating in them. We go about doing work without awareness of the relevance of the moment or the recognition that what we are doing is communication phenomena, or even "real" work. Such instances of this are when employees participate in unplanned meetings with other workers to accomplish some task for the organization. In fact, workers in organizational settings often collect in huddle formations near someone's desk, in hallways, in aisle ways, or around computer terminals to deal with job-related issues. Operators on production lines, engineers in administration areas, plant managers and supervisors, university administrators and professors, and other types of employees participate in impromptu meetings to solicit or deliver information. In informal meetings, they may make decisions or simply seek knowledge or opinions from others to confirm or reinforce their own ideas about a decision to be made at a later time. They do not participate in these informal meetings at regular intervals such as daily or weekly meetings as they do in formal meetings, but typically participate in them in response to a problem that needs attention. The following quote from a technician working in a corporate organization provides an example of the kind of interaction that occurs in informal meetings:

> I'd walk into an office and say: "Hey I'm working on this project. I need your help." This is how I would open it and end it by saying "okay good. Let me get at it," And I'm gone. "I'll let you know what happens."

Employing observations made at high tech firms and universities, I discovered that informal, face to face, task-related interactions as communication phenomena has typically been overlooked not only by communication scholars and researchers, but also by the persons who interact in them. Because of this problem, my research goal became the task to generating descriptions of employees' interactions in informal meetings. After my initial observations when I recognized the pervasiveness of informal meetings, I reentered several organizational settings

and began studying how group members use conversation to get practical activities done--collaboratively and interactionally--in the process of doing problem solving. I refer to these conversational activities as informal problem solving (IPS) meetings. I then look at what interactive skills that other researchers must learn and use to be able to distinguish IPS meetings from other task and non-task related gatherings of workers. For this I relied on Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological perspective for framing my observations. After collecting data about IPS meetings, I turned Goffman's (1961) perspective on "focused gatherings" for conceptualizing them.

In the following sections of this paper, I first review ethnomethodology and Goffman's term "focused gatherings" that serve as my theoretical framework, next I provide the research methods, then describe interactional mechanisms used by workers to accomplish the orderly features of IPS meetings. I introduce macro and micro-analytic approaches to studying informal meetings. The macro approach gives primary features of IPS Meetings such as their embeddedness in the larger organizational and their composition of these meetings. This micro-analytic approach takes a deeper look at the sequences of action by focusing on interactional details occurring during the phases of problem solving in informal meetings.

Perspectives of Study

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology consists of two words, ethno-and method. Contrary to what its title may seem to suggest, ethnomethodology is not a method but a sub-field initially developed in sociology that has come to be employed in other disciplines such as communication (e.g., Hartsell, 1994; Ragan, 1983, Wieder & Pratt, 1990). It is not a particular research method, for instance, introducing the researcher on how to conduct interviews or observations, administer questionnaires, or develop measuring instruments, but it is the study of methods and methodology as used by ordinary persons in their everyday lives. In short, ethnomethodology aims at

exploring methods of people as objects of study (e.g., their everyday utterances, interpretive processes, and actions, cf. Wieder, 1977).

Ethnomethodology has been employed in several studies to investigate detailed, interactional features of organizational communication that have been overlooked by other perspectives. These ethnomethodological studies have provided insight into organizational behavior by bringing workers' explicitly, reflective, and intendedly rational methods of problem solving practices into focus and by investigating empirically available procedures that workers use enroute to finding solutions. One such study was conducted by Suchman (1984) who found recurring features of the interactional dynamics between humans and technology. Her study is suggestive of this research project in regard to her concern for looking beyond psychological or cognitive processes of people to discovering processes located in their interactions with each other. In another recent ethnomethodological study, Irons (1992) looked beyond cognitive models of individual's knowledge and applied the interactional approach for uncovering ways that organizational knowledge is constructed through worker's verbal interactions. Irons' study (1992) is also of special interest to this project because of its view that knowledge is socially constructed.

For the specific purpose of this study, ethnomethodology is used as a perspective for exploring methods that workers employ for accomplishing such tasks as having a conversation with a co-worker, solving work-related problems, coming to conclusions about past events, or making decisions about how to improve company products. The application of ethnomethodology as the study of tacit procedures or methods in everyday life laid the groundwork for studying workers' methods and provided the perspective for using participants' conversations to empirically analyze the procedures that workers use en route to a solution.

Goffman's Conceptualizations

For the most part, small group researchers have not studied the kinds of informal problem-solving activities in organizations that I am attempting to conceptualize in this paper. I find IPS meetings do not have many of the characteristics of formal meetings. For instance,

individuals gathering around someone's desk or standing in doorways do not define themselves as members of the occurring group. They are simply a collection of people who assemble for a few moments to solve a task. Participants may have a sense of commonalty because they are members of the larger organization, but do not necessarily have a sense of belonging in this gathering of workers.

I turn to the concept "focused gatherings" in Goffman's (19) sense rather than using the concept "group" as defined by small group scholars (Cragan & Wright, 1986; Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993; Seibold and Krikorian, 1997) to analyze and clarify informal problem solving meetings. Goffman (1961; 1963; 1983) referred to "gatherings" as any set of two or more individuals whose members include all and only those who are at the moment in one another's immediate presence. He proposed "focused gatherings" occur when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention, as in a conversation, a board game, or a joint task sustained by a close face to face circle of contributors (Goffman, 1961, p. 7). The following summary gives his formulation of the features of gatherings: A focused gathering occurs when persons are in each other's immediate physical presence. For the participants, this involves: a single visual and cognitive focus of attention; a mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication, a heightened mutual relevance of acts; an eye-to-eye participant's opportunity to perceive the other participants' monitoring of him [or her] (see Goffman, 1963, pp. 17-18).

I also turn to Goffman's (1961) sociological comparison of social groups for additional analytical footing. According to Goffman (1961), members of a social group perceive themselves as having a sense of belonging to the group, which possess general organizational properties that include regulation of entering and leaving; capacity for collective action; division of labor, including leadership roles; socialization function, and so forth (Goffman, 1961, p. 9). In contrast, he states "focused gatherings" are conceptualized as coming into being as persons come into each

others' co-presence and ceasing to exist as the next to the last party departs. They do not have a continuing existence through a time that extends beyond the concrete encounter itself. Goffman (1961) argued that "there are many gatherings where an extremely full array of interaction processes occurs with only the slightest development of a sense of group" (p. 11). Goffman (1961) proposed groups may exist even when a meeting is not occurring and when a meeting is occurring, all the members need not be present. Focused gatherings, on the other hand, exist only when the members are meeting (in each other's presence) and are focused on a common object, thus, having a sense of meeting in this moment about this topic.

Methods

My research began by intervi :wing key persons at two different Integrated Technologies (IT) plants, who included human resource representatives, training and development directors, work teams coordinators, a systems director, a communications director, the health club director, operators, supervisors, statisticians, computer programmers, safety technicians, equipment technicians, data specialists, and environmental technicians. I tape recorded several formal meetings and interactions in offices and wrote only field notes in some. For example, while sitting in one of the manager's office, I tape recorded conversations with him and others who happened to drop by to discuss work-related issues. The recorded conversations were not selected for any reason (such as their topic or who were the participants), but simply because they were happening. I recorded these conversations by setting up the tape recorder in the office. When a worker came into the manager's office, the manager turned on the recorder, and after the person left the office, the tape recorder was turned off. This same procedure was used each time a new person came into the manager's office.

After recording conversations in the manager's office, I sat in other workers' offices to record their conversations (e.g., systems analysts, engineers, and safety technicians). During these conversations, the tape recorder was never turned off except to change the tape. This

allowed me to capture both the informal problem-solving meeting as well as any social talk that occurred between or during them. I also conducted *tag-along* research with two managers and a safety technician as they simply went about their business. Tag-along research was a term used by the IT workers to refer to researchers who follow employees as they went about their routines. To supplement the data collected at Integrated Technologies, I have conducted interviews and observations at five other industries.

Macro Features of IPS Meetings

IPS Meetings as Ad-Hoc Gatherings

Given the nature of IPS Meetings, I turn to Goffman's (1963; 1983) term "focused gatherings" to more correctly conceptualize the ad hoc, spontaneous manner of IPS meetings in that they involve participants who have a single focus of attention and come together with co-workers in close proximity (see also Mangrum, Fairley, & Wieder, 2001 and Mangrum & Wieder, 1998 for descriptions of macro features of IPS meetings). While the participants in an IPS meeting may be members of a continuing work team, department, or sub-unit within a department, they need not be (and often are not) drawn from the same work group. An IPS meeting is assembled when one or more workers face an immediate or standing problems that encourages them to seek out a small number of colleagues for brief, ad hoc impromptu discussions and group consultations. IPS participants are focused on solving a particular problem (immediate or standing) and dissolve with its solution. Typically, IPS meetings are brief, initiation and termination is brief such that greeting exchanges are not elaborate and pre-business sociable talk is avoided.

The composition of IPS Meetings is also ad hoc. They are staffed by co-workers whose skills, knowledge, and sometimes authority are those needed to solve just this particular problem. Those who call the meeting select co-workers whose participation they anticipate can rather directly contribute to the apparent problem's resolution and also those co-workers whose

cooperation, because of the range of their occupational duties, need to be enlisted. This method of assembling IPS meetings has the consequence of restricting participation in a specific IPS meeting to those whose knowledge about some aspect of the meeting's occasioning problem is apt to contribute to its resolution. Unlike formal meetings where participants are often attending because of their membership in the group.

These meetings are assembled just as they are needed, not as regularly scheduled meetings. An IPS meeting is not called in advance, but is assembled in response to a problem requiring immediate attention before one worker can continue with a particular task. Thus IPS meetings do not occur at regular intervals, as is the case with daily or weekly meetings. Participants rarely receive warning that one of these meetings will happen and the time that a meeting will take is also not a known-in-advance feature of it. IPS meetings are assembled now or "in just a minute" when "I'll be coming by" or "you come here." The arrangement may be made by phoning ahead, leaving voice mail, or by just dropping by. An IPS Meeting characteristically has no collection of agenda items, only the initiating problem. IPS meetings happen "on the spot," near someone's desk, in hallways, in aisles, or around computer terminals.

IPS Meetings' Relations to Other Meetings

IPS Meetings as being embedded in the larger organizational setting. They occur against a backdrop of frequent meetings of many different kinds. Although many IPS meetings may have no visible connection to a larger formal meeting, we found that IPS meetings and formal meetings are a matter of reciprocal context, each potentially providing thematically relevant context for the other. In fact, in IT, the "gathering information about a problem" phase of formal problem solving groups is typically performed before or after a formal meeting not during it (Mangrum & Wieder, 1998). IPS meetings may furnish the seed for ideas that are to be discussed and expanded later in formal meetings held in conference-type rooms or they may be a response to issues raised in formal meetings.

While IPS Meetings are often connected to other types of meetings, they may not have any connection to a larger formal meeting at all. IPS participants may discuss a problem that concerns only a few and does not require input or agreement from anyone other than those immediately involved in the problem. IPS meetings often consist of workers seeking confirmation from others because they are uncertain about a decision that needs to be made. Many times, these meetings consist of a worker going to a nearby coworker and talking through an issue that results in the emergence of a problem. One participant will play the role of active listener while the other simply "thinks aloud." At other times, IPS Meetings occur because several people are affected by the situation, which leads them to discuss the problem and reach consensus collectively. In these instances, the solution cannot be decided by an individual, but must be analyzed and agreed to by several members who represent other workers or departments within the organization.

External Stimuli from the Larger Context

Another important feature of IPS Meetings is the way that participants often incorporate external stimuli from the larger context that members in formal group meetings typically do not encounter (cf. Mangrum & Wieder, 1998). The joint focus of IPS meetings occurs against a backdrop of competing messages, messages that paradoxically may become part of the problem or its solution. Unlike formal meetings and certain classes of meetings with executives whose inbound communication is guarded and screened by assistants, IPS meetings are often punctuated by the receipt of e-mail, faxes, and print-outs as well as phone calls. These externally initiated messages are dealt with in the midst of an ongoing IPS meeting in ways that the participants find to be proper and not distracting.

As a frequent external stimulus, computers play a tremendous role in IPS meetings and become part of their face-to-face encounters (see Mangrum, Fairley, & Wieder, 2001). IPS is often structured around (and sometimes results from) information displayed on a computer screen. Because the workers often find that they do not understand or cannot find a message

currently displayed on the computer screen, or they cannot manipulate the computer to produce a message that they understand, they often consult with coworkers to find, clarify, decode, and make judgments about the coded information. Together, the assembled participants examine information displayed on the computer screen, offer commentary about the computer's display and respond to inquiries from their coworkers.

Micro Features of Informal Meetings

A common perception about informal meetings is that they are unstructured, unorganized, and involve a free exchange of ideas. Participants believe that they can say whatever they want without worrying about following any particular format or set of procedures. Another common perception about informal meetings is that participants may follow a system of interacting that they have developed over time as a result of their experiences of working and solving problems together. This perception assumes interaction systems are developed by participants and are unique to them and may even allow them "to know what their co-worker is thinking." Evidence of these kinds of assumptions is provided in the following quote made by a systems analyst, as she describes her interactions with a member of user support personnel:

> I worked with her. I sat next to her for seven years. "Uh." We, yeah, we go "uh huh," "yeah," "uh huh," "yeah," "uh huh." At least we have our own system that works. We just read each other's minds. We're just- we're just so comfortable with each other. I don't even think we give it a thought, you know. We say whatever comes to our minds. We don't worry about what we say and we naturally can follow what the other person is going to do. Because we've been together or worked together for years, worked so many problems, you know.

Analysis of actual interactions between the systems analyst and her co-worker reveals that the appearance of features described in the previous quote do exist in their conversations. They often say "yeah" and "uh huh." Because they are able to complete the others' thoughts and sentences, they seem to be able to read each other's minds. Also, there is the appearance that they

have developed a system that is successful and unique to them. The systems analyst's description, however, does not describe the particulars of their interactions. It does not explain in detail the orderly and temporal quality of their informal meetings that I found to be at the heart of IPS meetings at Integrated Technologies.

During the analysis stage of my research, I noticed that there is a pattern in the way IPS participants open and close meetings. I also discovered that participants recurringly employ recollective/prospective (R/P) cycles as interactive devices that enable the discussion to flow in a pendulum-like manner between two types of talk. The recollective phase of IPS meetings is when participants attempt to uncover background information, while the prospective phase is when workers project about future events or offer explanations about unknown events that occurred in the past. I identified the temporal order of the R/P cycles from the many hours of analyzing conversations that I collected at Integrated Technologies and from reading Garfinkel's (1967) descriptions of the documentary method of interpretation, an interpretive process that he argued everyone employs when assigning meaning to situations.

Garfinkel (1967) defined the documentary method of interpretation as a practical reasoning process whereby people use individual documentary bits of evidence to piece together underlying patterns to make sense of objects or events and to use the pattern to further evaluate and elaborate the details. In this research project, I adapted Garfinkel's (1967) analysis of individual's interpretive process to the collaborative work conducted by small groups of workers as they attempt to solve organizational problems. In my analysis I found that over the course of an IPS meeting, participants produce many recollective/prospective (R/P) cycles as a way of using the documentary method of interpretation to collaboratively assemble meaning of the problem. Based on these discoveries, I developed a micro-analytic approach to describe interactional mechanisms used by workers to accomplish the orderly features of informal problem solving (IPS) meetings.

Phase One of the Micro-Analytic Approach

Openings in IPS Meetings. This next section describes the first phase of the micro-analytic-approach to informal problem solving. This phase consists of conversational devices that participants employ to open the meeting. Data from this study reveal that although IPS openings are accomplished by suspending the need for typical greeting forms (e.g., "hello-hello"), they are produced with utterances that have greeting-like properties in that they set up the sequential nature of the meeting. Openings in IPS meetings are able to accomplish this by using preliminary utterances to establish this sequencing pattern. They structure the meeting by projecting or foreshadowing what will be given in subsequent turns, which in the case of IPS meetings, signal that the following talk will be an organizational issue.

The following data segment (excerpt 1) provides an example of an IPS opening that serves as preliminary work in what Schegloff (1980) and others have referred to as projected action sequences. In this conversation, an engineer and the researcher of this project are engaged in social talk about family members. Another engineer steps into the office to ask about a task-related issue. Lines 006 ("Kirk I have question") and 015 ("Kirk I have a question uh") in this opening function as the first action of the preliminary work. Lines 015-018 serve as the second action in that they provide necessary background information. Finally, the projected action of the preliminary work is accomplished in line 019 ("uh (.) are those recipes in the spec somewhere?").[1]

Excerpt 1

001	F:	you know we're almost kin (.) (hh) started to say you
002		looked like him but I knew you weren't ( )
003	K:	yeah
004	F:	his son=
005	K:	=no=
006	C:	Kirk I have a question.
007	K:	=younger brother
008	F:	well Chanel is my brother's- my husband's first cousin

009 K: oh really

010 F: Lamar and my husband's mother were brother and

011 sister (.) That's the reason I knew that name:

012 K: oh: okay

013 C: small world

014 K: it is

015 C: Kirk I have a question uh (.2)

016 the recipes that I watched you change in there the (epi-

017 adapters): (.) last Friday (.) with the HCL form

018 K: uh (.)

019 C: uh (.) are those recipes in the spec somewhere?

Together, the first, second, and third action turns of this IPS opening (006, 015-019) function to announce an organizational issue will be the topic of conversation. In line 006, Clint attempts to open the meeting by closing the ongoing social talk with a preliminary statement that projects an action ("Kirk, I have a question"). This preliminary statement, however, does not successfully take the floor from the other speakers nor receive a "go-ahead" to do the projected action. After this failed attempt to open the meeting (006), Clint then waits for a closing in the social talk. After the social talk closes, Clint then repeats the projected action initially offered in line 006. Finally, he successfully opens the IPS meeting by repeating the projected action ("Kirk I have a question"-015) and is allowed to continue as next speaker after the transition relevance place at the end of this line.

In the second action of the preliminary work, Clint offers an "understanding check" of a past experience (lines 016-017). Finally in line 019, he accomplishes the projected question ("uh are those recipes in the spec somewhere?") as the third action. Together these three actions set up what the speaker intends to do in following turns, and serve as a way for the speaker to take the floor from other participants who are engaged in another kind of meeting (e.g., social talk or

another IPS meeting). It also shows that projected actions in IPS openings are similar to their counterparts in ordinary conversations as depicted by Schegloff (1980), in that they are followed by understanding checks that are then followed by the action.

Phase two of the micro-analytic model

Recollective/prospective (R/P) cycles. Data from this study reveal that participants use recollective/ prospective (R/P) cycles as a conversational procedure to move along the temporal and interactional agenda of IPS meetings and to advance specific organizational goals. They utilize R/P cycles as an interpretive and interactional mechanism to keep talk flowing until sense can be made of the problem. Similar to what other ethnomethodological researchers study, I, interestingly, point out that the activity of using R/P cycles in IPS meetings provides participants with a method of making their problem solving talk rational and sensible. By using the cycles, workers follow a course of practical reasoning that makes use of historical details and proposals about future events to explain the present moment--a type of reasoning practice that is a specific application of the documentary method of interpretation. They employ this method as an everyday, common, "normal way of thinking" (which is to use the past to guide the present and future).

Recollective phase. This section provides a description of the recollective phase in IPS meetings. Data reveal that during this phase, participants conduct "active searches" to recall or collect background details about past events. In the recollective phase, one or more members who typically have background knowledge share this knowledge with others. An important quality of this phase is that the active recollection is achieved collaboratively in a conversational manner and is locally and sequentially produced. Unlike formal meetings, where participants are allowed extended amounts of time to formulate uninterrupted turns or claims about the problem or solution, participants in IPS meetings must incrementally formulate their claims about the history of the problem with the collaboration of other participants involved in the meeting.

The following excerpt (2) provides an example of the recollective phase of an IPS meeting. During this meeting, workers are reconstructing details of a problem by conducting an active search into the past to make sense of the current situation. In this segment of the meeting, participants are reconstructing the details of an event that happened several days prior to this meeting. The details concern whether or not a night shift operator should be terminated because he walked off the job before his shift was over. The participants include the operator's manager, his supervisor, and a human resource department (HRD) representative.

Excerpt 2

001 M: SEE this is the last week. She just give me- gave me the
002 review right over
003 R: this- this was last Friday?
004 M: last Friday or Saturday one of the two I don't even
005 know what time=
006 R: you don't know what time it was
007 M: and h- he was mad because he didn't get more
008 money. he didn't say anything about leaving or
009 nothing walked out of here. walked downstairs.
010 changed his shoes and left.
011 R: What time was that? what night was this do you know?
012 M: nine.
013 R: About nine o'clock. So early in the shift?
014 M: I may be wrong on that uh Tommi is not home.
015 R: So Tommi is the supervisor?
016 M: yeah
017 R: Have you had anybody to do this before to you Mark?
018 Just get up and walk out Do you know?

019 M: and come back? no. I've had people get up and

020 walk out, but not in the U cycle.

021 R: just don't

022 M: We had people who go out there and work till

023 midnight and leave. See if you can find any records

024 on Steve over there.

In this IPS meeting (excerpt 2), the manager and supervisor recall bits of information from their memories about the problem. They do this in a collaborative and incremental manner until they piece together the answer to the HRD representative's questions. In lines 001-002, Mark gives the first increment of information about the operator by suggesting the operator's behavior may have been a reaction to the employee review process (this process determines if someone will receive a pay increase or promotion). In lines 007-010, Mark offers more information about the possible *cause* of the operator's behavior ("he was mad. . ."), then describes his *actions* ("he didn't say anything, walked out of here, and walked downstairs, changed his shoes, and left"). Other details of the problem presented in this incremental fashion include what Mark and the supervisor know about the *time* of the event. In line 003, Rob, the HRD representative, narrows Mark's general information about the time of the operator's behavior occurring during the week of employee reviews to a more specific time frame. Although Mark confesses he does not have the specifics of the situation, Rob continues soliciting more details about the time of the event (011). Their conversation moves to other topics in lines 014- 023, then returns to the topic of time (in line 023) as the participants continue to collaboratively and incrementally piece together or assemble documentary evidences to construct the underlying picture of the problem, that is, explanations about the operator's behavior.

Phase three of the micro-analytic approach.

Prospective phase. The previous excerpt (2) demonstrates how participants in IPS meetings construct interpretations of problematic situations by piecing together details of the

problem's history or assemble a picture of what is already known about the problem. This next section suggests participants use prospective information to enhance and elaborate the historical details of problems that were gathered in the recollective phase. During the prospective phase, participants may utter references to tasks being performed in the present moment, offer projections about situations that could occur in the future, as well as search for details that are "unknown" to the any of the participants. Levels of communication action that may be performed in a prospective phase extend from reporting on an action performed in the "here and now" (e.g., "now we're finished building this thing") to offering hypothetical visions that describe situations beyond the particular time and setting (e.g., "you just hit s, submit it, and you go get a cup of coffee").

The following episode (excerpt 3) provides an example of a prospective phase in an IPS meeting. In this segment, Mark has verbally given Danny a set of computer commands and Danny has typed them into the computer. Now they are both looking at the screen and reading the results of the Danny's action. As new information appears on the screen, Mark offers prospective talk explaining what this information means and what the software program will do in the future.

Excerpt 3

M: this is something that you can look at through D F edit whatever
you want to make changes to: anytime you can go had lots out
here: however you want you can change this
date so each month
all you have to do is change the date, change the lots, and the
minutes. It will- well okay what its going to do is it's going to uh
go out there extract the data and put it in power word page and
then uh and then it will download it to your P C and put it
under F E A B I dot P E W

The next segment (excerpt 4) illustrates the prospective phase of IPS meetings in which workers are constructing an explanation of what might have happened in a past situation. The workers were unable to witness the actual problem when it occurred, so they are assembling information to make projections about events that are "unknown" to both of them. Rather than projecting about future possibilities, they speculate about the indefinite and unknown state of affairs. During this IPS meeting, one engineer has approached another to discuss information presented earlier in a large formal meeting. After Clint gives a recollective description of the problem, he and Kirk then give a prospective version of what they perceive to be the cause of the problem.

Excerpt 4

C: Now. uh this morning they talked about the uh tool well I- I was so: so confused by their statement that I didn't even notice what the second problem was. What was the second problem?

K: the there were three problems during the day. First was the metal ((a segment of the conversation is omitted))

C: so- so the second problem was downloading thing was coo- I thought I saw something about a recipe. You think it was a problem in the download? or maybe they just didn't do the download?

K: I just think they didn't do the download

C: and that generated additional problems that took more time to correct

Recurring R/P cycles. Over the course of an IPS meeting, participants produce many recollective/prospective (R/P) cycles as a way of discussing various aspects of a problem until it can be resolved. They utilize the R/P cycles as a reasoning scheme for piecing together solutions to organizational problems in an incremental and collaborative manner. The sense of the problem is achieved as their talk moves in a pendulum-like manner that swings back and forth from giving

historical details about the problem to offering projections about it. The next section provides a detailed examination of how interaction is accomplished with recurring R/P cycles. In this excerpt (5), the workers are discussing the need for ionizing radiation training for employees and whether or not certain employees should be required to take the training.

Excerpt 5

((1st Recollective Phase))

G: Okay uh what was your for the first question?

C: uhm my first question is what are the uhm sources of radiation that we have in there that require ionizing radiation training of some of our people.

G: okay I tried to sketch those things out here in longhand uh basically you have seven inplanters five of which are Eatons, two variants. You have two floor (derms) and there's currently two twin cities in operation. There's also one in storage, but if its in storage well obviously no is using it

C: uh hum

((1st Prospective Phase))

G: but if its brought back into production well then we have to uh do some more uh paperwork with that

((2nd Recollective Phase))

G: uh these are regarded as ionizing or x-ray producing equipment in which uh since we work here in the state of Texas. Texas has its own regulatory agency that oversees uh radiation programs

C: uh hum

((2nd Prospective Phase))

G: and so IT as well as any other company that has uh radiation equipment is subject to inspection and any time uh there's a pretty good chance that sometime in ninety five we'll

probably get inspected and so what we're trying to do of course is to make sure we come through in as good of shape as possible.

In the first recollective phase, Connie and Glen start the active search for the "history" of the problem; that is, they discuss the background of the current problem which extends into the past. In this phase, Connie asks a question about the sources of radiation that require training for the employees, then Glen takes a multi-unit turn to incrementally provide the requested "historical" information. In the first prospective phase of this R/P cycle, Glen projects about the possibility of a future event ("but if its brought back into production well then we have to uh do some more uh paperwork with that"). In the recollective phase of the second R/P cycle, the speaker provides more background information about x-ray producing equipment and radiation programs, then projects into another prospective phase with a proposal about a hypothetical scenario of an event that could happen at a future time. Glen's terms such as "any other company" and "any time uh there's a pretty good chance" indicate he has moved out of describing the "here and now" in this current IPS meeting at Integrated Technologies to "any time" and "any company."

The Fourth Phase of the Micro-analytic Model

Closings in IPS Meetings. Phase four of the micro-analytic approach. In order to move quickly from the beginning of an IPS meeting to an R/P cycle, which gets the first topic onto the floor, participants typically open meetings by suspending the need for common greeting forms. Similarly, in closing sequences, participants may end an IPS meeting by suspending farewell exchanges to eliminate the long drawn-out good-byes that are typical of interpersonal interactions (cf. Knapp, Hart, Friedrich, & Shulman, 1973). An obstacle, however, to accomplishing the brevity of closings in IPS meetings is that the closing must be accomplished as a sequence that includes both a "preclosing" and a "terminator" (Sacks, 1992b, p. 88). This requires participants to have the "know how" regarding where to place the beginning of the ending into ongoing talk in order to get to an utterance which actually ends the turn-taking format by lifting the invitation to

start implicit in every transition-relevance place (Nofsinger, 1991; Schegloff & Sacks, 1974). For example there are sets of things like "goodbye-goodbye" that say after we're finished with that, nobody needs to talk. But getting to the place where "goodbye-goodbye" works is the problem. At some point in the conversation, somebody has to offer a preclosing such as "okay" or "so I'll see you Tuesday" before a terminator can end the meeting. The following excerpt illustrates how pre-closing utterances start the closing sequence of the meeting.

Excerpt 6

001: M: yeah all that separates is what you're going to have
002 for each occurrence (.)
003 we don't have shift on here:
004 all we got is ( ) like that (.)
005 that's why- why we cant get into it (.)
006 anyway that'll
007 D: okay
008 M: help you out some
009 D: (.) yep get them all but tha ( ) operators on always
010 I'll have to look at it to see if the operator (is)
011 different ( )
012 thank you sir
013 M: you're welcome

Usually in a conversation, it is someone's responsibility to find a place to start the preclosing sequence. In IPS meetings, this person who typically initiates the start of a closing is the person who enters another person's office or the person who stops and interrupts another worker. (See Sacks, 1992a and Schegloff & Sacks, 1974 for more descriptions on who typically finds a place in the conversation for starting the preclosing.) In lines 006 and 008 of excerpt 6, Mark, who has entered Danny's office to help him key in computer commands, initiates the

closing sequence. "Anyway that'll help you out some" is the first part of the pre-closing. In lines 009-010, Danny responds appropriately to the pre-closing move with "yep get them but tha ( ) operators on always- I'll have to look at it to see if the operator (is) different ( )." These utterances serve to "wrap-up" or summarize the outcome of the work that they just performed. After the pre-closing, Danny then provides the first part of the terminal sequence. In line 011, he states "thank you, sir" which obligates Mark to return with the conventional reply "you're welcome."

The following excerpt (7) illustrates how closings are collaboratively performed by showing what happens when collaboration between the participants is not achieved. It reveals that it takes one person to find a place in the conversation to start the preclosing, but it takes two to actually accomplish the closing.

Excerpt 7

001	M:	uhm (.) and once you get to that point
002		you just (.) hit s (.)
003		submit it (.)
004		and you go get you a cup of coffee. (.) (h)
005	D:	(.) what does it (.) print out?
006	M:	it will-well okay what its going to do is
007		it's going to (.) uh (.) go out there
008		extract the data
009		and put it in power word page (.)
010		and then (.) uh and then it will download it to
011		your P C (.)
012		and put it under F E (.) A B I dot P E W

In line 001-003, Mark is giving Danny the procedure for changing the computer software. In line 004, he starts the pre-closing by projecting Danny into the future and suggesting he "go

get a cup of coffee." Obviously, Mark thinks that he has given Danny all of the necessary instructions to complete the changes and basically states, "I have nothing more to say," and "I'm ready to end the episode." (By giving future plans to go get a cup of coffee, Mark may be doing the kind of pre-closing that Sacks (1992a) describes as endings in stories. Often in stories, an ending is presented as an ending to something such as "the prince died" or "night time came and they all went to bed"). In this IPS meeting, Mark attempts to end the job (i.e., the meeting) by saying "now it is time to get a cup of coffee." Danny, however, does not respond to or offer a next move to Mark's pre-closing or closing sequence, but opens up a new issue about "printing the information." Because opening a new topic is a proper and possible next move, they do not proceed to a terminal sequence. This excerpt, therefore, shows how IPS closings involve collaboration by both participants.

Conclusion

I have presented a comprehensive picture of informal problem solving meetings where gatherings of workers meet around computer screens, at their desks, in doorways, and in halls to accomplish multiple work-related tasks. Given the extensiveness and relevance of IPS meetings, formulating a theoretical framework for understaning these kinds of interactions in the workplace are particularly important for communication theorist. As a starting point, I have provided an explanation of their observable ad-hoc qualities: They are work related, they dissolve with a solution/conclusion, the participants have skills and authority to participate in them, they occur on-the-spot, and the participants use resources at hand, particularly, collaboration with co-workers.

In light of the ad-hocness of IPS meetings and their unnoticed status in organizations, ethnographic methods are well suited to investigate them, and Goffman's depiction of focused gatherings and comparison of them to social groups provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for understanding the macro features of informal meetings. This term more correctly conceptualizes the ad hoc, spontaneous manner of IPS meetings in that they involve participants

who have a single focus of attention and come together with coworkers in close proximity. To build on our descriptions of IPS meetings and Goffman's conceptualization of gatherings, I recommend more research is needed to explain the methods that workers use to accomplish in this type of interactions.

In response to this research problem, this analysis attempts to uncover interactional details of informal meetings by providing a micro-analytic approach to problem solving and describing the temporality of these meetings. This micro-analytic approach identifies the phases of talk in IPS meetings as: (1) the opening; (2) recurring retrospective/prospective (R/P) cycles; and (3) the closing. Data segments presented illustrate how IPS openings and closings are brief and typically accomplished in only a few turns with the collaboration of other workers. Openings establish the sequential nature of informal problem solving, while closings serve as a way to end the sequences of conversation action.

The defining feature of the micro-analytic approach introduced in this study involves the recurring R/P cycles that serve as an interpretive scheme as well as an interactional device for the participants. As it is shown, the activity of using R/P cycles is a crucial way that participants gather details of situations in order to create verbal representations or collaborative interpretations of organizational problems. In the recollective phase of R/P cycles, participants conduct "active searches" to reconstruct details about past events to make sense of current problematic situations. In the prospective phase of R/P cycles, workers offer hypothetical visions describing situations beyond the particular time and setting of the IPS meeting at Integrated Technologies. Together, searching for recollective details and sharing prospective information is the workers way of constructing interpretations of what has happened, is happening, or might happen. Consequently, participants recurringly employ the phases of R/P cycles as the conversational procedure to move along the temporal and interactional agenda of a meeting and to advance specific organizational goals.

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[1] The transcription system utilized in this study for conducting conversation analyses is based on the one presented by Beach (1989), which was adapted from the notation system developed by Gail Jefferson.